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The Work of a College during the War

Address at the opening of the 118th year of Middlebury College, September 20, 1917

By President John M. Thomas

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THE WORK OF A COLLEGE DURING THE WAR.

In opening this 118th year of Middlebury College we might ignore the situation of our country, hurrying its energies into the great war, and counsel how we might shut out from our minds during the coming months the distractions of public events and concentrate our attention on academic pursuits. I might urge you to forget as far as possible submarines and aeroplanes, and trenches and dugouts, and advise that since you are now in college, enlisted for study, you drop all thought of any personal relation to the great conflict or of any other topic connected with war.

But even if it were possible to divorce our thought from the stupendous events now occurring, and from the awakened passion of our nation to bear its part in the renovation of the world, it would not be patriotic for us to do so. As teachers and students we are still citizens, and even at the cost of considerable diversion from the educational endeavors which are our primary purpose, we must follow the course of the struggle, informing ourselves as best we may of the deeds of the armies and the fleets, and still more carefully seeking to work our way through to the real issues of the conflict and the principles which are being fought out for the world to live by after the great horror has passed. College men and women should allow none to excel them in patriotism, nor in patriotic interest in the problems and endeavors of their country.

But it would not be in the interest even of your education to attempt to forbid you all thought of the war and its issues while pursuing your studies. To ask you to forget the war would not be sound educational method. Education has for its object to make one at home in the world, to enable one to take his place as a man in the world of men. This war is changing the whole face of things; the life of man is going to be different in a thousand ways after it is over. An education, therefore, which is sound and practical, must fit one for life in the renovated world, and that means that the process by which it is becoming new, the principles and ideals which are being thrown into the discard and the new ones which are taking their places, must be taken into thoughtful consideration. You are expected in about twenty years to catch up with a very old world, and a world which has been moving the last three years at a pace never before maintained. To ask you to remain indifferent to what is now occurring would be to propose to leave you a whole era behind the world in which you must live. Let us not try to forget the war, but rather let us inquire what the work of a college should be during the war. I propose that as my subject—the work of a liberal college during the present conflict of the nations.

Part of that work is direct,—service under the colors in army and navy. We are already represented by over one hundred alumni and former students and the list is growing daily. Middlebury is bearing her full part of the great sacrifice which the American col-

leges are making. When the statistics of the war are compiled, it will be found that a larger proportion of college men entered the service than of any other class. They are subject to the same draft and they were first to be called upon for the officers' training camps. Their eager and noble response has been an inspiration to the entire country, and their part in the conflict will be a witness for years hence to the sound and thorough patriotism of the American colleges and their great value and importance in the life of our nation.

It may be that we are by no means through with the sacrifice we must make. We have learned by this time to be deliberate, to wait until we learn where our service will count for most; but we stand ready, I trust, to the last man to place ourselves under the flag when the path of duty is clear. We are in the war to win. A part of our heritage in our mother tongue is the counsel of Tom Brown at Rugby,—"Boys, don't fight, but if you do fight, don't give up while you can stand or see." We tried to obey the first part of that motto, and we will not be found disobedient to the other part if it takes the last man who can pass the surgeons.

But at present the nation has chosen whom she desired and through high officers of army and navy, through the national Commissioner of Education, and even by the voice of President Wilson, has bidden the rest of us maintain our college at the highest possible standard, both in attendance and in quality of work. There can be no question of the wisdom or

the patriotism of that advice. It has been suggested that colleges and universities turn their laboratories during the war into experiment stations for war industries and occupations. They were not built for that purpose, and for the most part such work can be done better elsewhere. A recent writer in The Nation has proposed that college faculties, freed from pressure in the care of students, become University Extension lecturers and engage in a campaign to instruct the public in the meaning of democracy. There are practical difficulties in the way of carrying out this suggestion which perhaps I need not take the time to mention.

I believe that a college can do its best work during the war by being a college and doing the normal work of a college under the stimulus of the great endeavor of the nation in its fight for world-wide freedom. I do not mean "college as usual," college as if the country were not involved in the greatest conflict of all times, but college as the issues and struggles of the war have revealed that a college ought to be. I think it can be shown that this great war has brought into the clear a new ideal and purpose of college training, or at least a purpose different from that which many of us held formerly.

The aim of college education as held by those undertaking it has been for many years increasingly utilitarian. Young men and women have gone to college, in order to better their prospects in life, as a stepping stone to a profession or a place in business in which financial or social rewards would be increased.

This has held true of students in liberal arts colleges as well as those in technical institutions leading directly to an occupation. One of the favorite arguments for a college course has been a comparison of income of college graduates with those of only a high or elementary school education, and the argument has been used fully as frequently by classical and liberal institutions as by technical and professional schools.

The sacrifices of men on the battlefields and of the thousands in training for the service condemn this attitude. While our brothers are giving their lives in the service shall we pursue our selfish advantage here? While they face hardship and death, shall we plan and labor to increase the comfort and luxury wherein we may spend our life? I trust we are of worthier manhood than that.

Moreover, the war reveals the insufficieney of the individualistic attitude. We might fit ourselves for high personal rewards and find it impossible to reap them because our whole nation is in bondage. We are dependent upon our country. Without a nation free, strong and wealthy, none of us can be free, strong or wealthy. Lowell's great lines,—

"What were our lives without thee!
What were all our lives to save thee!"

were an appeal to patriotism, an apostrophe to the love of country; but they are also a statement of cold, substantial fact. In these terrible days nations have enemies which would enslave whole populations, rob them of their homes and livelihood, and ravage and burn the very temples in which they worship God.

What profit a university training, fitting its possessor for a lucrative position, to a youth in Belgium today, or to an Armenian graduate of an American college in Turkey? The question—What were our lives without our country—is a very practical inquiry as to fact and condition. Our lives without our country to defend and protect us, to make the conditions of our living enjoyable and uplifting, to guarantee for us a society in which justice, equity and benevolence prevail were very little worth.

This war has led us very rapidly in the direction of some form of socialism. Individual effort, competitive strife for the largest possible share of the good things of the world, is giving way rapidly to community effort on a large scale and reaching down into the intricacies of life in order to protect and conserve the common good in which alone the individual may win and hold any good for himself. The movement affects even such personal matters as our daily food. It were never more clear that no man liveth to himself and no man dieth unto himself.

The Germans were the first of the great nations to learn the lesson and they are today the most highly organized and socialized people in the world. In their view every member of the empire, from the Kaiser to the humblest peasant, lives for the nation alone, and the nation has a right to all that he has and is and must direct his life to the last detail for the carrying out of the national purpose. Each contributing his part, whether in the army, the factory, or in the field, they are putting forth a united energy that seems

almost superhuman to make their empire the master of the world. The end they seek is power, and power in order to wealth, that they may rule by land and sea and be the master of the peoples of the earth, with none to make them fear.

Shall we fight them on their own level and try to put ourselves in the place they are seeking? Shall we seek to organize ourselves, politically, socially and economically, to the end that we may make ourselves one of the allied nations dominating the world, ruling it by military power, and crushing the liberty and life of others on the principle of the survival of the strongest?

It is the great achievement of President Wilson that he has brought into the clear and imbedded in the common mind through a phrase that will never be forgotten another and far higher purpose. The democracy which he has set in the heart of the world is no mere political and governmental method. The German statesmen who interpret it as an attempt at dictation as to their form of government miss the real meaning of it. We have lived at peace with imperial Germany all our lives and were strenuously desirous of continuing to do so. Our national spokesman suffered patiently for years reproach and rebukes without number for his insistence on neutrality toward the Imperial German Government. The change from neutrality to passionate attack, in which Mr. Wilson has carried the heart of America whole-souled with him, was caused and forced by immoral diplomacy and by savagery and inhumanism in the conduct of the war.

We are fighting for something more than freedom of the seas, something other than to checkmate the plan of a central European empire ruling the world from its line of fortresses from the North Sea to the Persian Gulf. We are fighting for the maintenance in human society of customs, laws, and usages which are proper to civilized humanity, and we are fighting against the attempt to establish the laws of the jungle as recognized and permanent usages in the relations of men and governments with each other. Our enemy is baby-murder on the high seas, and the bombardment of the cathedral at Rheims, and the rape of Belgian women, and the exile and enslavement of civilian workmen, and poison gas and defiled wells and the unsexing of Servian boys, and the massacre of 750,000 Armenian women and children—the most dastardly and horrible crime ever committed under the eye of Almighty God. It is these things that have overcome all the natural impulses of the American people to abstain from war, and reversed the deep-imbedded national policy, sanctioned by Washington's great name, to hold ourselves aloof from European quarrels, and which have brought us heart and soul together to win against Germany. It is not merely to make the world safe for nations of democratic political method; it is to make the world safe for the ten commandments and the Golden Rule, to put down savagery and clear the way for a human society in accordance with principles of justice and charity.

A larger, nobler goal of manhood has dawned upon

our horizon. We have been content hitherto to let things in general drift, while we made each for ourselves the most cheerful and comfortable place we could, with as large a share as possible of the good things of life, and of course with proper consideration for those personal principles and ideals which bring one happiness in the long run, as well as a decent regard for the rights and privileges of our fellowmen. Our manners and methods have been for the most part tolerable, but our purpose and goal have been wrong. Our philosophy has been individualistic, whereas in the future it must be social. We have based our life on the principle of the struggle for existence. Tempered with many amenities from our natural humane impulses as well as from the teachings of ethics and of religion, we have nevertheless held by the principle of the utmost possible for ourselves in the competitive struggle of the world as the mainspring of our life's endeavor. But the old world of competition and war, from which Darwin deduced the doctrine of the survival of the strongest, doubtless with all truth and accuracy, has become impossible. The struggle for existence may have obtained once, and it may be all right for tigers still, but as a philosophy of the men of the future, it is branded by the light of the flaming ruins of Europe as a doctrine of hell. If that is human nature, we must change it. If that is the world, the real and actual world of today, we must build a new world. It does not follow that a biological law which obtained in the era of the saurians must hold good when man has come to his dominion. We

may have descended from the brutes, but that is no reason why we should stay brutish. Man is also a creator, and in Galilee two thousand years ago there was sketched a model for his work that shall not pass from his heart till all things spoken by the prophets shall be fulfilled. "And I saw a new heaven, and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth are passed away."

The problem of youth, therefore, is not, How can I train myself for the position of largest personal advantage in a world of competitive struggle—but rather it is, What can I do to make myself a helpful and efficient worker toward the worthier world we must create? The task is not how to make one's self most successful as a competitor, but how to develop one's manhood to the greatest efficiency as a social unit.

The work of the college, accordingly, is to help you grip the problem and work out a solution of your own personal relation to the world's freshly discovered task. You hear a great deal of the increasingly insistent call for men and women of scientific training in the industries and commerce of the country. The need of trained workers in the laboratories and draughting rooms cannot be supplied. But there is another need not less urgent and still more difficult of supply, that of men and women of mind and soul to understand and interpret the new order of things in our world. We are come to a new era. We have been living under the laws of the jungle, and we must learn to live under the laws of God in the great family of man. We must work out and make clear a new con-

stitution for human society on the basis of righteousness and justice and mercy. We must have a new philosophy of life, based not upon the struggle for existence, but upon the struggle for worthier existence. The wages of selfish endeavor for personal aggrandizement, such as we all sought for under the old régime, is death: the tightening grip at the throat of Germany proves it. From the war, which at first seemed to furnish evidence of the bankruptcy of Christianity, is coming the revelation that only on the basis of Christian truth, Christian morals, and the Christian principle of life for the life of others, can a stable and decent world be established.

This conception ought to give life to all our college occupation. A new world is in the making. We stand before the birth of a grander creation than that of the dead and barren stars. A new earth ruled by justice and brotherhood is forming in the throes of war before our eyes. The sign of the Galilean is in the sky for one more victory. All our text books must be re-written. The end of many a tendency and struggle recorded in history has now come into evidence, and in the light of the issue we must tell the whole story anew. The new ideal of humanity will affect our view of all ancient and modern literature. Political and social science and economics must open new chapters, more important than all which have gone before. Even the natural and physical sciences will take on new meaning from the higher and nobler purposes to which their laws and truths will be devoted. There is no institution

which has a more practical and needful function just now than the college which is devoted to the study of the humanities. In the past our work may have seemed at times a bit unreal, and you may have thought that we were holding you back from practical interests of vital moment. But nothing can be of greater moment than the principles and ideals of the manhood which henceforth is to be upon the earth. To work these out together and to establish in our minds the constitution of the world's new day when the lust of the conqueror shall no more devastate the earth and humanity shall unite its efforts, all for the welfare of all, is our college work the coming days and years, and may God grant us in the fulfillment of the task a zeal and devotion consonant with the nobility of the ambition.

Members of the Incoming Class: You begin college work at a time when thousands of your brothers in our great country are making the utmost sacrifice for the flag they love and for the cause of liberty and right. You can justify life in these pleasant halls and the privileges of academic fellowship at such a time as this only by your best endeavors to make yourselves such men and women as will bless and ennoble the nation they are defending with their lives. There is but one place for every true man and every true woman in this day of peril for our country—under the colors, either at the front, or with like devotion, for the country's good, in one of the needful tasks of peace. There is no task more needful than the development of manhood of the high ideals and the

strength in the execution of them which the new era requires. To that task I charge you through all the coming four years to consecrate yourselves with a devotion worthy of those who represent us where deadly danger lies.

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